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ATTITUDE AND OPINION SURVEYS: PROVIDING TIMELY

ADVICE TO POLICY MAKERS

by

Lieutenant Colonel R.S. Collyer

September 1989

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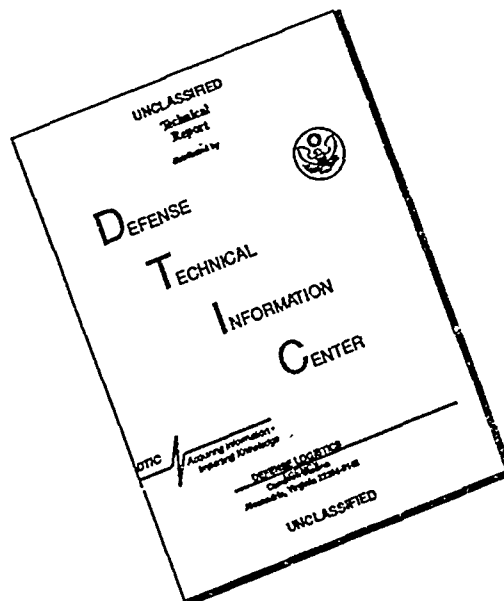
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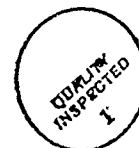
Sandra Richardson
S.M. RICHARDSON
Lieutenant Colonel
Commanding Officer
1st Psychological Research Unit

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Abstract

In the past five years there has been a substantial and worrying increase in the number of Australian Army members leaving the Service. This paper outlines the main survey oriented research programmes undertaken to gain information for policy makers on why officers, non-commissioned officers, and soldiers leave. Changes which may induce them to stay are also canvassed. Periodic surveys of Regular Army and Army Reserve soldiers are conducted to provide a comparison base and to monitor changes in attitudes and opinions so that problems may be identified and addressed as they arise. Problems in development and analysis of surveys designed to provide timely management information are briefly discussed. Some comparison to the results of overseas research is made.

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The findings and views expressed in this report are the results of the author's research studies and are not to be taken as official policy or opinion of the Department of Defence (Army Office).

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Over a period of about 10 years until the early 1980s, the Australian Defence Force loss rate of personnel was fairly constant. Fluctuations were usually in the order of one to two percent from the long-term average of 11.2 percent. This meant that replacement was within Army's capacity to manage.

In 1983/84 the Australian Defence Force wastage rate was 9.4 percent, and this has climbed steadily to a high of 13.2 percent for 1987/88 (These figures vary slightly depending on whose statistics are used.). This steady climb has created problems for replacement, and further problems are expected for several reasons:

- a. Firstly, there is a substantial lead time to replace trained and experienced personnel, so the Army must operate without these experienced people until the lead time is made up. In the years 1985/86 and 1986/87 the Regular Army lost about 10 000 soldiers and 1 200 officers from a force of about 32 000 - a very considerable problem of replacement.
- b. Secondly, it takes time to increase the capacity of the selection and training systems, even when you have identified the types of people and the types of training needed. At a time of stringent financial constraints it is often not possible to increase quickly the Army's training capacity - for a large number of reasons, including availability of physical facilities, staff ceilings, lead time on acquisition of training stores etc. So one issue is to have in place a system which identifies and reacts to significant trends in a timely fashion.
- c. Thirdly, the problem is increased by the findings of demographic research which forecast a sharp decline in the size of the pool of people we typically recruit (15 to 24 year olds). The size of the pool decreases sharply in the early 1990s and should increase again towards the year 2000.
- d. Fourthly, there is a tendency for young people to remain in education longer. Although the Army provides different forms of training, including academic and trade training, it competes with post-secondary institutions for its recruits.
- e. Fifthly, there is an increased reluctance for younger people to commit themselves to a long-term career, so the Army attracts more recruits who plan to stay only a short time. This creates higher turnover and increases the costs of maintaining an Army of a given size.
- f. Sixthly, the wastage is not evenly distributed across different employment areas for officers or soldiers, ie the problem of loss of trained and experienced personnel is more acute in some areas than in others.

These are all good reasons to reduce wastage and therefore avoid having to recruit and train new people.

Aim

The Army wanted information so that its policy makers could develop options for policies to reduce Army wastage and increase the cost-effectiveness of Australia's defence. This presentation provides an outline of some attitude and opinion survey research that is part of the information gathering process. It does not present detailed results, but concentrates on general findings and some of the problems encountered.

Attitude and Opinion Survey Projects

The Army survey projects that I will outline are:

- a. The Soldier Attitude and Opinion Survey,
- b. The Other Rank Discharge Survey, and
- c. The Officer Resignation Survey.

All three survey questionnaires, although developed by different principal researchers, were developed after consideration of literature reviews, previous Army research, open-ended question pilot surveys, and extensive consultation with a wide range of Service personnel.

The Soldier Attitude and Opinion Survey

A major problem in attitude and opinion research is that of knowing what is the 'normal' state, or normal level of arousal, of an attitude so that we can then identify an improvement or a worsening, from a management point of view, in that attitude.

The Soldier Attitude and Opinion Survey is a project which has established a baseline of measurement for a wide range of attitudes and regularly monitors those attitudes so that changes can be linked to changes in policy. Specific problem areas can be identified for more detailed research.

The baseline was established in November-December, 1986 using a 20 percent random sample of all serving Other Ranks, ie, privates, non-commissioned officers and warrant officers. The questionnaire was administered to groups of respondents by Australian Army Psychology Corps personnel, but no names were recorded on the completed questionnaires - responses were anonymous.

The questionnaire contained 15 background information questions (biodata) covering areas such as those shown on this viewgraph (Table 1).

Table 1

Soldier Attitude and Opinion Survey
Biodata Examples

-
- * Age
 - * Sex
 - * Marital Status
 - * Number of dependants
 - * Type of present accommodation
(eg, own home, married quarter)
 - * Type of enlistment
(eg, apprentice, national service,
regular army)
 - * Length of service
 - * Type of unit (eg, Field, Training
Command, Service)
 - * Rank
 - * Re-engagement intention
-

There are also 41 scaled attitude items (using a seven-point scale) relating to various aspects of Service life. Here are some examples (Table 2):

Table 2

Soldier Attitude and Opinion Survey
Attitude/Opinion Question Examples

-
17. How do you think your life in the
Army compares with that of
civilian friends of your own age?
- much less.....much more
satisfying satisfying
22. How has your training and experience
in the Army prepared you for your current
job?
- very poorly.....very well
34. How do you feel about the number of
times you have been posted during your Army
career?
- far too many.....not posted
times often enough
-

This first survey established a baseline. Since then, a two percent sample has been randomly selected and surveyed each three months until early 1989. In early 1989 the time interval was slipped from three months to six months to reduce the workload for administration. This six month time gap was judged to be a sufficiently accurate measure of any change. One of the main challenges of this project is to provide prompt reports of the survey results in non-technical language for the Army staff.

Other Ranks Discharge Questionnaire

Every soldier being voluntarily discharged from the Army is anonymously surveyed. The questionnaire contains 30 items of background information, many of them similar to those for the Soldier Attitude and Opinion Survey, 44 items relating to reasons that might have influenced the respondent to leave, and 40 items relating to factors that might have influenced the respondent to stay in the Army. The items have a great deal of overlap with the Soldier Attitude and Opinion Survey questionnaire ones, although they are often not worded identically, as would be the ideal state, because identically worded questions are not always appropriate to both serving soldiers and those who are leaving. This survey project began in 1986 with the pilot survey being conducted in late 1986 and the first full survey commencing in early 1987.

Officer Resignation Survey

For some years prior to 1986, officers resigning had completed an exit questionnaire that was used by commanding officers to provide exit counselling. There were some obvious problems with this if one wished to identify real reasons for exit with a view to minimising resignations - eg, Hodge (1987) states that '... nearly all officers swore undying allegiance while tearfully lamenting their departure to take up a unique resettlement opportunity' (p7). The project was taken over by the 1st Psychological Research Unit, a new questionnaire was developed and survey administration was changed. One change is that responses are now anonymous. The new questionnaire, not suprisingly, has much in common with the soldier one, and the quality of information has improved greatly.

Results and Problems

In 1989, after detailed psychometric analysis, all three questionnaires were modified slightly to remove questions that contributed little, and to clarify questions that were apparently not clearly interpreted in the way in which the questionnaire authors intended. It is pleasing to note that the thoroughness of the development of the questionnaires meant that there were few problems with the questions. For each survey project a variety of analysis was conducted, including chi-square analysis to compare distributions of responses on the same questions over time, exploratory factor analysis to seek underlying variable structures, and regression analysis to identify closely correlated variables. When we gain enough time measure points for the Soldier Attitude and Opinion Survey database we will also use time series analysis. In the case of the Soldier Attitude and Opinion Survey questionnaire, a project using structured interviews was also conducted to validate the interpretation of the questions. The results of the Soldier

Attitude and Opinion Survey questionnaire validation have not yet been published.

No detailed results are presented here. Several research reports have been published and are available through the library network. The results of the research have been used extensively by Army to develop policy options, although it is fair to say that the results have provided no clear-cut solutions to the problem of high wastage. It should be pointed out that the researchers made it clear to the policy makers from the start that the research would provide information, but that it, ie, the information alone, would not provide answers to policy problems, and indeed could identify more problems. The research has also formed a substantial source of information for Army's submission to the Cross Committee inquiry into Defence Force wastage, and Army reports are cited in that committee's report. Some general problems and conclusions will be mentioned.

I think the utility of factor analysis is limited for data such as this. It is certainly interesting to see the results, and factor analysis is useful as part of understanding the data, but the factors tend to be either as expected - perhaps because you know what was considered when the questionnaire was built - or they are very complex ones and very difficult or impossible to explain. Never-the-less, we have gained some useful policy development information from the use of factor analysis.

Overall, analysis of the survey data tends to show that the reasons for leaving that people commonly offer do not discriminate well between those leaving and those staying. In many cases the negative attitudes of those remaining in the service are not much different from the attitudes of those leaving. This could mean that we researchers have not asked the right questions, ie, we don't yet know what the discriminating information is, but our feelings are consistent with those of other researchers both in Australia and overseas (in Australia, Salas, in a series of 1980s papers on Royal Australian Navy officer wastage; overseas, Stolzenberg and Winkler summarise the work). It could well be that the negative attitudes are job dissatisfiers for many people and that this starts some of those people looking for alternative employment, in the way discussed by Stolzenberg and Winkler, but that the real reasons are far more complex than those tapped by the survey questionnaire.

I am personally inclined to support the Stolzenberg and Winkler concept, just as I was sympathetic to the Thibaut and Kelley work that Stolzenberg and Winkler cite. I think that building up to a decision to leave is a bit like building a brick wall. The dissatisfaction adds bricks to the wall and the satisfiers pull them out. If the wall gets big enough the decision is made to look elsewhere for employment. Once a person starts looking at other jobs, they are at risk of finding a job they believe to be better and of deciding to leave. Each person has their own concept of how high the wall has to be before they look elsewhere.

I think that this concept of how high the wall must be before a person looks elsewhere is driven by a combination of a global feeling of how much a person feels his or her worth is recognised by the organisation, and by a perception of what the options are for alternative employment. For example, while matters such as pay may not be intrinsically critical in a person's value system - and this is often the case with professional soldiers and officers - pay may be one tangible measure of perceived worth, and perceived injustice in the management of pay matters may be viewed as poor recognition of worth. Similar reasoning can be applied to lack of consultation about the management of a person's career, affecting postings and hence family disturbance, wife's career, children's education, etc.

Another problem is that of aims and expectations of survey projects. Some people will come to you with clearly defined aims on which you can start work. Usually, however, they will come with a problem that they think you should be able to help them with, so that your first task is to define the problem and work out what you can do to help. This may take quite some time, but it is critical. You must then develop a clear set of objectives for the project, and check with the user that you both clearly understand what you will provide. I have been involved in over 100 surveys in three different countries and I am convinced that this is the critical phase. It is not for self-protection later - if you have to keep protecting your backside then there is something seriously wrong with your credibility. It is because you must have the objectives clearly understood in order to provide the user with good information. A survey is designed to serve a specific purpose - it is tailored to the survey objectives for a host of good reasons, not least of which is economy of resources.

The point about surveys being tailored to meet specific objectives is raised because one of the problems I have invariably met is that of someone coming along, after the survey has been conducted, with a host of new questions that they expect you to be able to answer. Often you can help. If re-analysis of your data can't help, I find the best explanation is in terms of objectives, resources allocated to meet objectives and not being wasted by using a 'shotgun' approach to data gathering.

In the Army we think we were smart in proposing to management that we operate the Soldier Attitude and Opinion Survey project. We got it operating before the really urgent questions arose and so it meant we could provide some very timely information. Of course, the trade off is that because we could only guess at the questions, this survey's objectives are 'big picture'. The survey takes an overview of attitudes and there are many detailed questions that we can't answer, but the project has a very important place in the Army's personnel research strategy.

The problem that we nearly all face, but one which is especially critical in applying psychological research in the work place, is one of time - or rather the lack of time. As we know, good research, especially in the nature of surveys, takes time. Policy makers never have enough time to give you to conduct things at a leisurely pace - and that is their right because they are subject to time pressures beyond their control. If you are to retain your credibility with these people you must really know your operations when you sit down to talk with them - how long it will take you to produce results, what measure of reliability those results will have, what resources you will need. Always a critical item of knowledge is just how much you can trade increased resources for a shorter time frame - it is not a linear relationship.

In the Army we are lucky. Senior officers are straight talking practical people. They are used to relying on experts - expert gunners, expert engineers, expert communications people, expert medicos. The Australian Army Psychology Corps has been around for about 35 years, and although some Army people are still skeptical of the 'trick cyclists', by and large you gain a lot of experience quickly and can talk straight to senior officers - who will listen.

That completes this presentation. I remind you that detailed reports on the research are available through your library system, or by contacting the librarian at 1st Psychological Research Unit. Thank you for your attention.

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